

Dr. Sylvester Grinnell Matson

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DR. SYLVESTER GRINNELL MATSON.

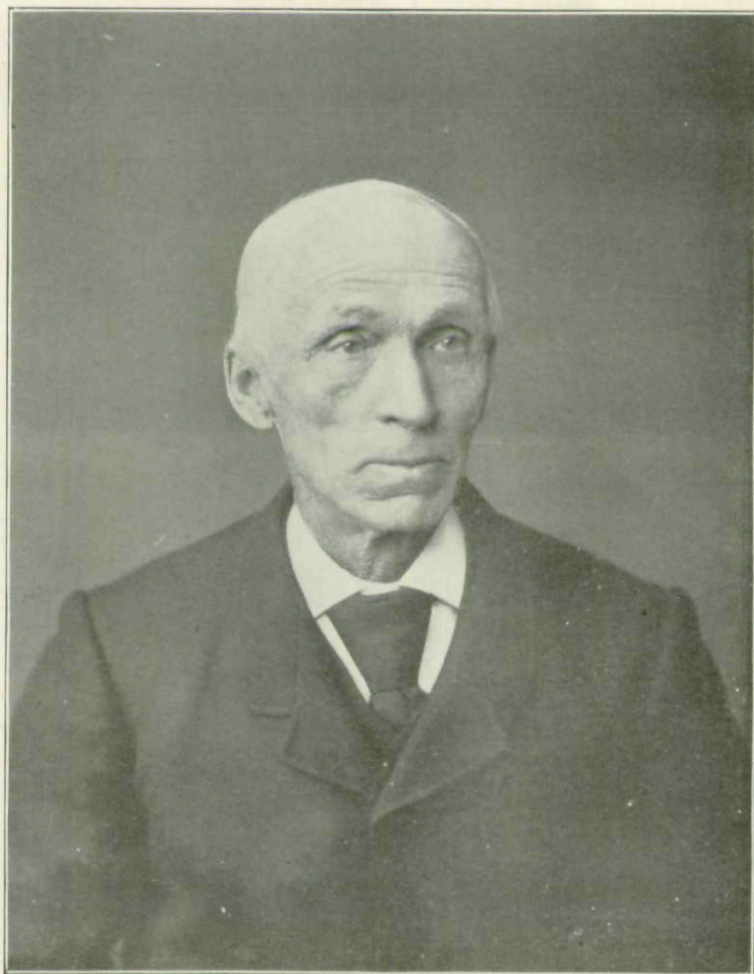
BY CHARLES ALDRICH.

(A paper read before the Pioneer Law-Makers' Association, February 1, 1898.)

Mr. President, and Gentlemen of the Pioneer Law-Makers' Association: It is a sad duty which has devolved upon me to announce the death of one of our oldest and most distinguished associates, the Honorable Sylvester Grinnell Matson, which occurred at the residence of his son-in-law, the Rev. Dr. S. N. Fellows, at Fayette, Iowa, on the 5th instant. Had Dr. Matson lived until the 5th of March he would have seen his 90th birthday. In writing me Dr. Fellows enclosed the following obituary which I will read:

Sylvester G. Matson, M. D., was born in Middletown, Vermont, March 5th, 1808, and died in Fayette, Iowa, February 5th, 1898. His early life was spent amid the hardships of New England. He had meager opportunities for securing an education, but by hard labor and close private study, he became qualified to teach school, and by teaching earned means to prosecute his studies in the Medical Department of the University of Vermont. From this he graduated with high honors in 1832. He then returned to Middletown, Vermont, and soon after removed to Van Buren near Syracuse, New York. He also practiced a few years in Chenango county, New York. Here he was frequently called to deliver addresses on the Fourth of July and other public occasions, and received from the general public and the press very high encomiums. In 1845 he removed with his family to Iowa and settled near Anamosa, in Jones county, and at a later period removed to Viola, Linn county, where the latter years of his life were spent.

In 1846, he was a member of the Constitutional Convention which framed the first constitution of the State of Iowa. He was also elected a member of the First General Assembly of the State, which met at Iowa City November 30, 1846, and in extra session January 3d, 1848. Failing by one vote of being elected speaker of the House, he became chairman of the committee on schools and took a leading part in enacting the first school laws of the State. He also prepared and introduced the bill locating the State University at Iowa City, and was afterwards a member of its first board of trustees. He was thus associated with Senators James Harlan, A. C. Dodge and G. W. Jones, and Governors Briggs, Hempstead and Grimes in laying the foundations of this great State. Dr. Matson was



Truly Yours -

S. G. Matson -

DR. SYLVESTER G. MATSON.

Pioneer Iowa Physician, member of the Constitutional Convention of 1846, and
Representative in the first General Assembly.

proud of Iowa, of her history and institutions, and of the great and noble men with whom he was associated in the first years of her Statehood.

Dr. Matson was humane, patriotic and religious. He was the friend of the poor and no one in need was ever turned empty from his door. In private life he was remarkably temperate in his habits, using neither tea, coffee, tobacco nor intoxicating drinks; and in public and professional life was a strong advocate of free schools, total abstinence, prohibition of the liquor traffic, and the organized charities of the State.

In politics, he was originally a "Jeffersonian Democrat." He united with the Republican party at its organization and voted for John C. Fremont for president in 1856. He continued an ardent Republican, casting his last presidential vote for William McKinley in 1896.

In appreciation of his services rendered the State, by request, a life-size oil painting of Dr. Matson was secured and placed in the Historical Department of the Capitol at Des Moines.

Dr. Matson was a member of the Methodist Episcopal church and a firm believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. In his last long and tedious illness of over fourteen months, he was ever calm, patient and trustful—thankful for all the little kindnesses shown to him, and frequently expressed a desire to join the many friends in heaven.

He leaves an aged and invalid wife residing in Viola, Iowa, and three children, viz: Benjamin L. Matson, a lumber merchant of Anamosa, Iowa; Sarah L., wife of Rev. S. N. Fellows, D. D., of Fayette, Iowa, and Catherine L., wife of Prof. Goodyear, of Chicago, Illinois.

Dr. Matson died at the home of his daughter, Mrs. Dr. S. N. Fellows, in Fayette, Iowa. The body was buried in the family lot in Riverside cemetery at Anamosa.

I feel that an appreciative and grateful word is due from the Historical Department to the memory of this excellent man. From the time of its organization in 1892, until the decrepitude of age settled upon him, no man in Iowa, within the scope of his means and opportunities, labored more earnestly than Dr. Matson to lay its foundations and promote its growth and usefulness. He became at once a collector of historical and biographical data, war relics, objects in natural history, geological, mineralogical and botanical specimens, anything and everything in short, which could add to its usefulness or make it an attractive place for visitors. If there was an item in his own or any of the surrounding counties which I desired to add to our collections, I had but to mention it to him and straightway he set about obtaining it. The Department is indebted to him for scores of valuable items. Among these, as of most value, are copies of our

early laws, legislative journals, and the Journal of the Constitutional Convention of 1846—all long ago out of print and now scarce and almost impossible to obtain. When all of his contributions—many of which are very precious—are duly labelled and placed in appropriate cases, they will constitute a monument which will keep his memory green for many generations. As stated in the obituary notice which I have read, the Historical Department is the owner of a fine oil portrait of this distinguished pioneer law-maker.

Dr. Matson was a man widely known and respected for his great kindness and benevolence. I was his guest at his home in Viola, Linn County, some years ago. He was still practicing medicine, though he was nearly or quite eighty-five years of age. Sometime after dark a boy called to ask him to go and see his little sister who was quite ill. The house where he was wanted was several blocks distant, and Mrs. Matson protested against his going out at that time of night. She suggested that they employ a younger physician. "Oh, no," he replied, "I have doctored in that family for twenty-five years, and they think that no one else can do them any good. I will go!" And the aged man lit his lantern and started out to visit the sick child. I was glad on his return to hear his report that the child was by no means dangerously ill. Soon after I made his acquaintance—in 1892 or '93—he sent the Historical Department his pill-bags and outfit of dental and surgical instruments, some of which were quite antiquated. Among them was one of those primitive "turnkeys" for pulling teeth. With power enough at the handle, it would come very near extracting a hickory stump. But every country physician in the days of my boyhood carried and often used one of these queer instruments. I suspect that away back in the fifties or forties some of those now present knew how these old "turnkeys" were operated. I had kept these articles a few months when the Doctor wrote me that he was having quite a run of practice and wished I would return his dental and surgical instruments—but that they should ultimately come back. Of course I forwarded them to him promptly. He kept them a couple of years and

sent them again in a quaint little wooden trunk, where they will be safely retained until the State provides a fit place for this novel exhibition.

During his whole life Dr. Matson bore the reputation of a good and useful man. He was a hard worker in his laborious profession, especially during his early years in Iowa, when the country physician had to ride long distances and face the terrible Arctic blizzards, often at the peril of his own life. As a legislator he achieved a reputation which will survive as long as the annals of early Iowa interest our people. As has been seen, he was one of the founders of our State University, and always a friend of the cause of education. He was a man of wide and versatile information, broad and generous sympathies, genial and kind in his intercourse with all, honest and just, respected and beloved throughout the circle of his acquaintance, in the best sense of the words, an old-time Christian gentleman.

"His youth was innocent; his riper age
Marked with some act of goodness every day;
And watched by eyes that loved him, calm and sage,
Faded his last declining years away.
Cheerful he gave his being up, and went
To share the holy rest that waits a life well spent.

"That life was happy; every day he gave
Thanks for the fair existence that was his;
For a sick fancy made him not her slave,
To mock him with her phantom miseries.
No chronic tortures racked his aged limb,
For luxury and sloth had nourished none for him.

"And I am glad that he has lived thus long,
And glad that he has gone to his reward;
Nor can I deem that nature did him wrong,
Softly to disengage the vital cord.
For when his hand grew palsied, and his eye
Dark with the mists of age, it was his time to die."

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